In December 2018, US President, Donald Trump, announced the withdrawal of American forces from Syria. His decision was made following a conversation with Turkish President Erdoğan, and in light of his assessment that the Islamic State has been completely defeated. The withdrawal of troops will take approximately three months, during which time 2,000 US soldiers stationed in Syria, mainly in Kurdish areas in the north and northeast, will be evacuated. Criticism of the president’s decision at home and abroad has not caused him to change his decision but the US did stress that it would continue to act against the Islamic State from its bases in the region. Recently, in addition to the claim that a plan is being formulated to maintain a US ground force in the Al-Tanf area, the Senate called on Trump (February 2019) to reexamine the decision to withdraw from Syria and delay it for the time being, as the move could lead to a renewed strengthening of the Islamic State.

The Western coalition, led by the US and with the participation of British, French, German and other forces, has been operating against the Islamic State since the end of 2014 - in the first stage from the air, and later by means of ground forces located in strategic areas as well. These forces were engaged in assisting, training and consulting with the local forces fighting against the Islamic State – mainly Kurdish fighters and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) soldiers.

In the beginning of 2016, an American helicopter landing pad was built in northeast Syria in addition to the American base Al-Tanf, near the border triangle between Syria, Jordan and Iraq. This area serves as a land corridor from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The American presence in the region, which is also based on Kurdish forces, does not allow the operational use of this corridor by Iran and its allies.

5 Ibid.
The American presence also serves as a counterweight to the Russian presence and activity in Syria. An example of this was the brazen US attack against Russian mercenary forces from the Wagner group who tried to take control of the oil fields in the Deir Ezzor area. The Americans killed approximately 300 Russians in the attack and blocked the attempted takeover.

Many believe that President Trump’s decision will have a significant impact on future developments in the region as it affects Israel and all regional players on both sides of the divide. It demands that all players re-evaluate, and design action policies and strategies as a result of new situation.

For the purposes of this document, we gathered leading experts who specialize in countries and/or terrorist organizations that we consider particularly relevant “players” affected by the withdrawal and examined their positions on the significance of the withdrawal of American forces from Syria, what is expected to happen in this arena following the move, and its impact on Israeli interests.

Since the beginning of human history, the Middle East has been very volatile, with a clash of cultures, peoples and interests. Today, the Middle East serves as the front line between the Muslim world and the Western world.

A physical presence on the ground is extremely important to build and maintain strategic capabilities and increase influence, with influence being the central feature of global powers (such as the US and Russia) and regional powers (such as Turkey and Iran).

The Americans first arrived in the region during the Second World War. In 1991, then-US President George H.W. Bush built an international coalition that included Arab states in the war against another Arab state – Iraq. During the Second Iraq War, additional US forces arrived in the region and occupied Iraq. Their physical presence in the region was very significant and even influenced Iranian strategic decisions – the Iranians, who feared that the American invasion of Iraq was a pretext for invading Iran, stopped its military nuclear project on their own initiative.

The Russians arrived in the Middle East at the end of the 1950’s as weapons suppliers. In this way, they created supplier-customer dependence, but it did not have the same impact as a ground presence. Their arrival in Syria led to a ground presence for the first time, with control over territorial assets (airports, ports, and both regional and national intelligence infrastructures).

The Chinese also want influence and are working to achieve it via the economy. China is dependent on the Middle East as a source of energy. Recently, the Chinese president presented a vision meant to give the country tremendous influence and power: the establishment of an international traffic route from China through Southeast Asia, to the Middle East until London.

**Turkey and Iran are competing for hegemony in the Middle East.** Since the rise of the Islamic State, they have both been taking action against the organization. Israel has not intervened against the organization because its rifles were not directed at it - a wise move.

**The Americans have the greatest influence when they are present in the region.** Trump does not understand that when the US leaves the Middle East, it will lose its influence there. The launch of cruise missiles at Syria from aircraft in the Persian Gulf, for example, cannot create a real influence of power on the ground.

**America’s physical presence in Syria is a strategic asset for Israel, mainly because it serves as a counterweight to the Russian and Iranian presence.** The withdrawal of US forces leaves the Middle East to Putin’s almost free will and Iranian influence. Iran is considered the “bad boy of the neighborhood” and does not conceal its desire for expansion. It exerts power through militias, and is currently present in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. By attempting to create a land route from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, Iran seeks to enable the free movement of weapons and military forces to threaten Israel. Once the Americans withdraw from Syria, the Iranians will have more freedom in the region, contrary to Israeli interests. The US needs to maintain some presence in the Middle East (military or otherwise).
The Islamic State established a brutal and exclusive terrorist state with impressive propaganda capability, all of which was damaged when the Islamic State disappeared: the organization is no longer effective in Europe and it is unable to rise again in the Middle East. However, the Islamic State can still "rear its head" as a terrorist entity, if not as a caliphate, as demonstrated by the latest terrorist attack against American soldiers.

The US withdrawal is a message that projects its power and image to the Arab world, Turkey, the Kurds and Israel. Israeli interests will be harmed as Russia becomes the strongest force in the region. The Iranians will also be strengthened because the US has helped curb their buildup until now, and they will continue to try to create a land route between Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

The decision to withdraw was not made in a serious manner, and conflicts with the opinion of military figures in the United States.

The US withdrawal from Syria will harm Israeli interests because Iran will become stronger and Russia will become the strong force in the region.

The American withdrawal from Syria affects the balance in the multi-player system operating in Syria. It strengthens the Russian influence and, as a result, the status of players connected to Russia, with an emphasis on Iran and Shi’ite militias.

The US withdrawal is liable to affect the future deployment of the players. For example, Iran, which strives for regional hegemony and is even prepared to risk confrontation to achieve its goals. It will seek to establish its hold on Syria in order to continue to realize its economic interests as well as preserve its security interests, aimed at maintaining a constant threat to Israel, directly or indirectly, through proxy organizations from the Syrian and Lebanese arenas. This state of affairs in the strategic environment of the "war between wars" could lead to an escalation between Israel and Iran, between Israel and Hezbollah, or between Israel and the Shi’ite militia forces operating in Syria. The US withdrawal expands the scope of Iranian action in Syria, making it easier to establish a ground axis from Iran through Iraq towards Syria.
The Shi’ite militias in Syria, estimated at tens of thousands of fighters, will be organized according to Iranian directives and interests, likely in areas from which they can intervene in a future confrontation with Israel, both directly from Syria and by dispatching forces to Lebanon to operate alongside Hezbollah.

As for Hezbollah, its involvement in the civil war in Syria has had far-reaching consequences for its organizational action pattern, its relationship with the Revolutionary Guards, its concept of war and its level of weapons. The organization underwent a transformation from a local player to a regional player operating together with other forces on a scope that is unprecedented for the organization.

Hezbollah’s organizational operational strategy changed from a defensive approach to an offensive approach (the recently discovered attack tunnels are only part of this change process). Hezbollah acquired operational experience during its years of fighting in Syria and increased its arsenal of precision rockets.

The US withdrawal from Syria creates flexibility from the viewpoint of Iran and Hezbollah regarding the scope and continued deployment of the latter in Syria, both for the purposes of securing Iranian activity and protecting Iran’s and Hezbollah’s interests in the region. Its presence will allow the opening of a front against Israel from the Golan Heights within a short period of time.

Iran wants to play the role of a regional superpower. Therefore, it sees great value in helping Syria, its ally. Turning its back on one of its allies - Syria, Hezbollah, Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces and the Houthis in Yemen - might tempt them to seek help elsewhere, as well as dissuade other countries from joining the Iranian-led alliance. Syria is Iran’s closest ally and has stood by its side since the start of the revolution in Iran, including during the Iran-Iraq War when it was its only Middle Eastern ally, while the rest of the Arab world and the Middle East (except Libya) supported Saddam Hussein. Therefore, anyone who expects Iran to completely withdraw its forces from Syria is daydreaming. Israel longs for this, but Iran’s current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, will not allow it to happen. Whether American forces are in Syria or not, Iran will continue to support Assad.

The US withdrawal will not affect Israel since there will probably continue to be an American presence in Al-Tanf.
Most of the Iranian nation opposes the regime’s current policy vis-à-vis Syria but the Iranian regime is trying to isolate these voices. The Iranian nation’s opposition to Iran’s presence in Syria is censored in the Iranian media. If a public figure, even a former one, dares to publicly criticize Iran’s policy, as did former Tehran mayor, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, in 2017, he faces a prison sentence. If the Iranian regime was confident of public support for its policy in Syria, then it would not take such extreme measures. The lack of public support for its Syrian policy makes it even more difficult for Iran’s leadership to present a compromise, since it can be interpreted as weakness at home.

There is no doubt that the presence of the Revolutionary Guards and their Shi’ite allies on Israel’s borders pose a danger to the security of the State of Israel. However, the US withdrawal will not affect Israel since there will probably continue to be an American presence in Al-Tanf, a strategic place for the Iranians to transfer weapons and operatives.

In order to cope with this danger, Israel must adopt a realistic narrative that calls for a reform in the number of IRGC forces and their allies in Syria, the weapons in their possession and their transfer to Syria, and their proximity to the Israeli border. Israel’s demand of “zero enrichment” from the Iranian regime and its call to deport all members of the IRGC are unrealistic. Even US President Donald Trump is expected to fall flat on his face in meeting such a demand.

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The Kurds have a great interest in cooperating with the US. On the one hand, they want to free themselves from the control of the regime in Damascus, which has oppressed the Kurdish minority for decades. On the other hand, they want to free themselves from the threat of the Islamic State, which has posed a real physical threat to the Kurdish population since 2014. In July 2014, the Islamic State attempted to capture Kobani, an important and symbolic city, but Kurdish steadfastness in the city allowed the Kurds to become a major force in the fight against the Islamic State and later, to enter into direct military cooperation with the United States.

The United States is a major strategic umbrella against the desire of the regime in Damascus to re-gain control over the Kurdish territories and against Turkey, which is interested in suppressing any Kurdish attempt to achieve autonomy or

Following the US decision to leave Syria, the only way to deal with the threat from Turkey, and simultaneously guarantee that Iran does not emerge the greatest victor from the civil war in Syria, is to establish positive working relations with Russia and the Assad regime.
independence, thus influencing the Kurds in Turkey to continue their efforts for independent status. Turkey claims that the Kurdish militia, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), is actually an arm of the PKK Kurdish guerrilla organization and party in Turkey, and poses a strategic threat to the country.

Kurdish forces constitute a key player in the US coalition with the SDF, in a mixed Kurdish-Arab framework led by the YPG, which has been fighting against the Islamic State since 2014 and until the recent battles against the jihadist organization on the Syria-Iraq border.

The US presence in an area under Kurdish control allowed them to extend their control over approximately 25% of territories in northern Syria, and establish a form of autonomy in the hope that it would become an independent state.

Now, after announcing its withdrawal from Syria, the United States demanded that Turkey not harm the Kurds, and President Trump agreed in principle to Erdoğan's proposal to establish a buffer zone of approximately 30 kilometers in northern Syria. The Kurds are not interested in this because they do not trust the Turks.

Since Trump’s announcement regarding the US departure from Syria, the situation in the region is very fluid, and as long as the US decision on withdrawal is not finalized, it is impossible to know how things will develop.

Turkey is concentrating large military forces on the border area with Syria after it already has control of the Kurdish area of Afrin, with Russian consent for the time being.

Should the United States indeed withdraw, and should the Turks begin the process of occupying the Kurdish area of the city of Manbij and east of it, the Kurds are ready to negotiate with the Assad regime to return under its control. As far as the Russians are concerned, this is a desirable move, since they want all of Syria to be under Assad's control and they have historical ties with the Kurdish national liberation movement.

Every Turkish military move is actually conditional on Russian approval to use the Air Force, since Russia controls the airspace over northern Syria. On the other hand, the move must also be coordinated with the US, as President Trump has even threatened to "devastate the Turkish economy" if it attacks Washington’s Kurdish allies.

This cooperation between Russia and Turkey bothers the Americans. Turkey is a long-time, important ally to NATO, but its policy is becoming more and more Islamist over time. Turkey buys S-400 missiles from Russia, contrary to the security interests of US and NATO forces.
Since the Kurds are allies of the US in the war against the Islamic State, the abandonment of these important allies sends a very negative message to its regional allies: Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Egypt and Israel.

In light of the recent attack on US forces in January 2019 in the city of Manbij, the US may not withdraw completely from Syria, but rather it will leave a limited number of forces, at least in the Al-Tanf area in southern Syria, on the border with Jordan. Another possibility is that the US will continue to assist coalition forces through American soldiers stationed at bases in Iraq.

Following the US decision to leave Syria, the only way to deal with the threat from Turkey, and simultaneously ensure that Iran does not emerge the great victor from Syrian civil war, is to establish positive working relations with Russia and the Assad regime. This dual focus on Iran and Turkey in Syria also brings the Gulf states closer to Israel’s agenda, which seeks to limit the use of Syrian territory by Iran and Hezbollah.

In the framework of this strategy, increasing support by the Gulf states for the armed Kurdish forces in northern and eastern Syria, and especially in crucial battlefields such as Afrin and Manbij, with or without direct American involvement, and their help in rehabilitating these areas have become crucial aspects in limiting the hegemonic ambitions of Turkey and Iran in Syria, Iraq and beyond.

The US withdrawal from Syria casts a heavy shadow on the aspirations and security of one of the world’s most persecuted peoples - the Kurds. The abandonment of the Kurds as a result of the withdrawal, after they have served as loyal and effective allies of the US in the battle against the Islamic State, is a misguided strategic move that will have serious implications for US allies in the Middle East.

It is very important to understand that an independent Kurdish state in the Syria-Turkey-Iraq border triangle is a clear strategic Israeli interest, as well as a moral and just thing. The State of Israel must act above and below the radar to help the Kurds today to lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the long run. Support for the Kurds - who are fighting against Islamic extremism, promoting democracy and gender equality, and helping to curb Iranian expansion in Syria - should be a high priority on the State of Israel’s political agenda. Even after the withdrawal, and in the framework of strategic dialogue with it, Israel must find ways to ensure that the US will continue to assist and support the Kurds.

7 See Appendix 1 for an explanation of recent developments in the context of a meeting that was held between Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdoğan at the end of January 2019.
The Kurds in Syria were and are still important allies for the Americans during the long years of fighting against the Islamic State. The Kurdish militias - which include male and female fighter units - have proven themselves as the most effective fighting units against the Islamic State since they joined the struggle against the murderous Islamist organization. In addition to being a pro-American fighting force, the Kurds also served as the "eyes and ears" of the Americans on the ground, and contributed greatly to their efforts to stay up to date on Syria and the various forces involved in events there.

The Kurds, for their part, receive five important things from their relationship with the United States: weapons and supplies, training, intelligence, aerial assistance and a political umbrella. Since the end of 2014, they have used American assistance to maintain their independence in northeast Syria, and to fight or deter their enemies in the region – the Islamic State, the Turkish army and forces loyal to the Assad regime. Without aerial support from the US and its allies, it is doubtful whether they would have succeeded in breaking the siege imposed by the Islamic State on the city of Kobani and its environs in 2014-2015 - a turning point in the campaign against the Islamist organization, which until then had advanced in an almost unstoppable manner in Iraq and Syria.

In light of their success, the United States financed and armed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella organization composed of local militias – Kurdish, Arab and others – that united in 2015 in order to fight against the Islamic State as well as other players in the Syrian arena. The SDF relies mainly on the Kurdish militias, who spearheaded the battle against the Islamic State in Syria, and thousands of their fighters were killed or wounded. They are responsible for the liberation of large areas from the organization's hold, including the city of Raqqa, its "capital" in Syria.

It is important to note that the Trump administration did not declare that it would completely stop aid to the Kurds. Secretary of State Pompeo said in his speech in Cairo in early January that the administration would continue to carry out air strikes against Islamic State targets as needed. However, although the full details have not yet been ascertained, there is no doubt that the withdrawal of ground forces would make it difficult for the United States to assist the Kurds as it has done until now. Trump’s statement that he trusts Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to fight against the Islamic State from now on also removes the political umbrella that the US has provided to the Kurds. This is despite Trump's later tweet that
that he “will devastate the Turkish economy” if Ankara attacks them. It seems that the Kurds will soon be forced to rely mainly on themselves unless they find another patron.

In early January, US National Security Adviser, John Bolton, promised that the American withdrawal from Syria would not occur without guarantees for the security of the Kurds. However, it is unclear how they can provide such guarantees without “boots on the ground”. Erdoğan has already fought against the Kurds and occupied territories under their control in northwestern Syria, and without an American presence there, it is hard to see what would prevent him from doing the same thing in the northeast part of the country. Absurdly, the fear of Erdoğan is pushing the Kurds into the hands of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and preparations for a possible attack by Turkey undermine the ongoing effort against the Islamic State.

The US withdrawal – conversation after it was reported that President Trump had made the decision following his talk with Erdoğan - also provides a tailwind and strengthens Turkey’s status in the Middle East, and may increase the self-confidence and courage of its president.

From the Israeli point of view, the situation has become more complex. If, in the past, Washington could have served as an intermediary and even a moderator in our murky relationship with Ankara, given the US involvement in the Middle East and its close relations with both sides, it is now unclear to what extent it can continue to do so.

The US departure also leaves Turkey to face the other forces involved in Syria - Russia, Iran and the Assad regime - without an American counterbalance, which will force Ankara to get closer to Moscow or at least be more attentive to it than to Washington. In the already cool relations between the two NATO member states, it is clear who the third party profiting from this is.

At the end of the day, the departure of US forces will leave Israel as the only significant force with the desire and ability to help the Kurds - militarily, security-wise and economically. We do not have many allies in the Middle East who see eye to eye with us on strategic issues like the Kurds. This is the time for Israel to move from talk to action, and to do everything we can to ensure that they gain the independence that they deserve.

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The Islamic State reached its peak in Syria and Iraq in 2014, when it succeeded in taking over a very large territory of approximately 90,000 kilometers. Since 2014, there has been a significant decline in its strength, and the size of the territory under its control shrank to less than 15 kilometers. As of today, the Islamic State holds several pockets of opposition in Syria (mainly in the east) and in Iraq. However, it is too early to eulogize the organization, as demonstrated by the deadly attack that it carried out in Manbij less than a month after Trump’s announcement on the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. In the attack, four Americans - who the Islamic State claims were senior intelligence officers – were killed. The Islamic State has returned to its original form, namely, an organization that conducts guerilla warfare while simultaneously concentrating efforts on restoring its strength and reorganizing its ranks.

A central question that arises following the expulsion of Islamic State fighters from their strongholds in Mosul and Raqqah, and other areas in the Fertile Crescent, has to do with the fate of the foreign fighters. The withdrawal will result in a certain intensification of Islamic State forces in Syria and a focused effort to attack Syrian, Shi’ite and Kurdish targets. However, even if there will not be any real change in the field, on the PR level, the Islamic State will leverage the American withdrawal to strengthen its image in the eyes of its supporters in the territory of the caliphate and outside it, and perhaps to attract additional volunteers to its ranks.

There are confirmed reports of some of them dying in battles, but there is no reliable evidence concerning all the foreign fighters - did they return to their countries of origin? There is evidence that some of them migrated to other arenas of activity, such as Afghanistan or the Sahel region in Africa, but there are still missing pieces to the puzzle.

According to recent estimates by American security agencies, the Islamic State now has between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq, approximately 14,000 of whom are in Syria. Some of them have probably been absorbed by the local population and some of them continue to fight on the battlefields.

A look at the official Islamic State publications, such as the Amaq agency, Al-Naba periodical, and videos by Al-Hayat media institution, demonstrates that most of the organization’s armed activities are focused on Iraq and Syria. The organization reported that between January 11-17, 2019, it succeeded in carrying out armed operations in several destinations that serve as arenas of activity from which it operates. In Syria, it carried out 25 armed operations as compared to seven operations in Sinai and only two operations in each of the following countries: Afghanistan,
West Africa, Somalia and Yemen. Its operations in Syria resulted in the highest number of casualties (101 killed).

Today, the same forces that fought against the Islamic State in recent years - mainly Kurdish forces, Shi’ite militias with the help of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Assad’s army and Hezbollah - are operating against the organization in Syria, but to a lesser extent.

Trump’s announcement about the American withdrawal is interpreted by the Islamic State as a victory in the campaign and proof of America’s mental weakness and demoralization. It can be estimated that the withdrawal will result in a certain intensification of Islamic State forces in Syria and a focused effort to attack Syrian, Shi’ite and Kurdish targets. However, even if there will not be any real change in the field, on the PR level, the Islamic State will leverage the American withdrawal to strengthen its image in the eyes of its supporters in the territory of the caliphate and outside it, and perhaps to attract additional volunteers to its ranks. In general, the Islamic State’s threat is not limited to the territorial level; it constitutes a threat on the ideological level as well. The organization is still directing a well-oiled propaganda campaign, albeit to a lesser extent than in previous years, characterized by a picture of victory, messages about the importance of loyalty to the Islamic Caliphate and other recruitment messages. Thus, the US withdrawal from Syria reinforces the picture of victory presented by the Islamic State.

The Islamic State’s branch in Syria does not pose an immediate threat to Israel since it “bound” to several parallel war fronts – against the Kurds, the Shi’ite militias, the Syrian army, other rebel forces and more. This does not mean that the threat shouldn’t be eliminated, since the organization has repeatedly emphasized that the Jewish state is also a target. The Islamic State’s branch in Sinai should be viewed as a more serious threat to Israel than other branches of the organization because of the cooperation between Salafist elements in the Gaza Strip and Bedouins in Sinai, and in light of several attacks previously carried out against the State of Israel from Sinai. However, this branch is also heavily bound to the battle against the Egyptian army, and therefore no threat from Sinai is expected at this stage.
When the US arrived in the region in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State was at the peak of its power. The Caliphate that it established was “thriving”. There are those who even compared it to “Great Britain” (the entire British island and Northern Ireland). The organization controlled a territory of 200,000 kilometers in eastern Syria, and north and west Iraq, west of the city of Raqqah, and from Raqqah east to the border with Iraq and beyond. The shape of the area resembled "lace webs" – the Islamic State controlled cities with population centers from which they obtained their income, and between the cities were areas not under their control (school zones and desert).

From the moment the US arrived in the region and began to lead coalition forces, the Islamic State’s power and the territories under its control began to diminish. A month and a half ago, the organization lost the largest town under its control, Hajin.

Today, the Islamic State controls several dozen square kilometers in an area next to Iraq – a population-free zone and some abandoned infrastructure. Nevertheless, the organization manages to move operatives into Iraqi territory and carry out terrorist attacks there. This is how it fought against the SDF, a local force made up of a coalition of Syrian democratic forces led by the Kurds with American assistance, and how it succeeded in hiding the organization's senior members, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

At its peak, the Islamic State controlled a territory of 200,000 kilometers. Today, it controls only several dozen kilometers. The US withdrawal from Syria is not expected to cause a change in its power.

Today, the Islamic State controls several dozen square kilometers in an area next to Iraq – a population-free zone and some abandoned infrastructure. Nevertheless, the organization manages to move operatives into Iraqi territory and carry out terrorist attacks there. This is how it fought against the SDF, a local force made up of a coalition of Syrian democratic forces led by the Kurds with American assistance, and how it succeeded in hiding the organization's senior members, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

At the height of its glory, the Islamic State had approximately 100,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq. Today, according to international sources, there are approximately 2,000 Islamic State fighters in Syria. According to the Iraqis, there are approximately 3,000 fighters. In Iraq, it is more difficult to estimate the exact number because there is local Iraqi recruitment and infiltrations by operatives moving from Syria to Iraq. I estimate that there are approximately 4,000 fighters.
There are various elements operating against the Islamic State in Syria:

- **A coalition formed under the umbrella of NATO**, whose main players are the United States, the Kurds, France, Denmark (Danish soldiers were sent to eastern Syria) and Britain.

- **Syrian local democratic forces** (a Kurdish force reinforced by other small forces and backed by America).

- **Small local militias**, Ansar al-Sham – the remnants of Al-Nusra. This force operates mainly against the Syrian regime but also sometimes against the Islamic State.

- **Iraqi Shi’ite militias**, mainly in eastern Syria (in the border area with Iraq), which operate mostly as a patrol force and to prevent infiltrations from the border, but also operate against the Islamic State.

- **Turkey** – provides passive assistance. Allows coalition planes to take off from airports in its territory and fly in its airspace, and assists in intelligence. However, it does not provide real assistance to the Islamic State on the ground and mainly fights against the Kurds. It is, therefore, surprising that Trump handed Erdoğan the “baton” to act against the Islamic State.

- **Russia** - There is a Russian military presence in Syria and from time to time Russian planes are sent to carry out bombings. However, Russia’s part in the battle against the Islamic State is minimal.

- **The Iraqi army** - The main element fighting against the Islamic State. It helps capture operatives, carry out air strikes and obtain high-quality intelligence. The Iraqi army usually recoils from wars that are not in Iraqi territory, but the Islamic State is causing problems for them and the army wants to prevent it from penetrating into Iraqi territory.

A campaign is due to be launched shortly, designed to destroy the Islamic State once and for all. It is expected to last about 10 days and the Iraqi army is expected to take a central role in the operation. The US will assist the operation before its complete withdrawal from there. After this operation, the organization is expected to further weaken. It will continue to exist as a small terrorist entity, but nothing more. We expect to continue to see a reinforcement of American forces in Iraq, mainly advisors, but not combat forces. There were approximately 5,000 Americans in Iraq, today there are approximately 9,000, and the number is expected to rise since there is no agreement regarding the departure of American forces from Iraq.

**Israel is not facing danger from the Islamic State because of the American withdrawal.** The phenomenon of Arab Israelis joining the organization has passed and it is not expected to re-occur.
Appendix 1 – Developments in Light of the Turkey-Iran Meeting and Geopolitical Changes

Dr. Ely Karmon, Senior Researcher, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT); Lecturer at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya

Russian President Vladimir Putin, and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, met on January 23, 2019, in Moscow. An important issue on the agenda was the agreement between the two presidents to solve the problem of the Idlib enclave in northern Syria, where pro-Turkish forces opposed to the Assad regime, but mainly jihadist organizations led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, have seized control. However, the main issue that was discussed was Erdoğan’s proposal to establish a buffer zone against the Kurds in Syria, with Russian support, and to examine the maneuvering room of both sides vis-à-vis the US. It seems that the presidents did not resolve their differences of opinion.

President Putin noted that they discussed the steps necessary to stabilize the situation in the Syrian Idlib region, where the joint struggle against terrorist organizations will continue. Earlier, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the situation in the region had deteriorated rapidly and that it was almost completely under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group of rebels formerly linked to Al-Qaeda. Putin noted that Turkey is doing a great deal to try to correct the situation, but further action is needed from both sides in order to "eliminate terrorist organization activities." Putin did state that there were no disputes over the construction of the secure buffer zone planned by Turkey, but he did not disclose details.

According to Al-Jazeera, the two leaders did not reach a concrete deal on the two central issues: the establishment of a buffer zone and the situation in Idlib. The Russians say that they will help their "Turkish comrades stay safe, but the preferred Russian way to do so is for Damascus and the Kurds to talk."

Nevertheless, the London-based Arabic-language newspaper Al-Quds Al-Arabi, reported that the meeting between Russia and Turkey was particularly important, since Russia and Turkey are negotiating an agreement in which the Syrian government would take control of Idlib, with Turkey’s blessing, in exchange for the establishment of a Turkish “safe zone” in the Kurdish region along the Turkey-Syria border.

Surprisingly, after Putin mentioned the 1998 Adana agreement between Syria and Turkey at a press conference with Erdoğan, Syria announced that it was ready to revive the security deal. Following a significant military threat from Turkey, Syria – which was under the rule of Hafez
Syria’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement, “Syria remains committed to this accord and all the agreements relating to fighting terror in all its forms by the two countries”. Damascus declared that it depends on Ankara ending its support for rebels seeking to overthrow the Assad regime and withdrawing its forces from northwest Syria.

Western diplomatic sources say that the timing of Putin's proposal to revive the Adana agreement was a move against US President Donald Trump’s recent call to establish a safe zone along the border inside Syria to support the Kurds.

In a January 25 speech, Erdoğan claimed that the Adana agreement gives Turkey the right to enter Syrian territory in the case of threats against the country. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said that his country is able to establish its own "safe zone" in Syria but he did not rule out cooperation with the United States, Russia or any other country that wishes to contribute to the issue. According to him, Turkey is in indirect contact with the Syrian government, but he did not provide further details.

Turkish Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar, warned Ambassador James Jeffrey, the US Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State, that the road map agreed upon by Turkey and the United States regarding the removal of Kurdish forces from the city of Manbij should be completed as soon as possible. Minister Akar told Ambassador Jeffrey that Turkey expects the US to end its ties with the YPG, and he emphasized that Turkey is determined to defend its rights and interests in accordance with international law and agreements between the two sides.

Recent diplomatic developments indicate that Turkey is in a position of weakness, since its decisions regarding the Kurds in Syria largely depend on the positions of Russia and the United States, which ironically are not interested in a Turkish takeover of the Kurdish region, for opposite reasons.

**Significant geopolitical change?**

According to an exclusive publication from December 2018 on the London-based Internet news site, Middle East Eye (MEE), a secret meeting was held in one of the Gulf capitals between senior intelligence officials from four countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and the head of the Israeli Mossad, Yossi Cohen. At the meeting it was agreed that the four countries view Turkey, and not Iran, as their greatest military rival in the region, and they discussed plans to counter Ankara's influence.

**Four steps were agreed upon at the meeting:**

- Assist President Trump in his efforts to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan through talks with Taliban representatives in Abu Dhabi, with the participation of officials from Saudi
Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan.

- Play the “Sunni card” in Iraq against Iranian trends of establishment.
- Return the Assad regime to the Arab League.
- Support the Kurds in Syria against Turkey.

The Kurdish issue includes support for Syrian Kurds against Turkey’s attempts to expel the YPG and its political wing, the PYG, from the Turkish border until the Iraqi border. It was also agreed to strengthen relations with the Iraqi Kurdistan Government (KRG) and prevent any reconciliation with Ankara.

Indeed, on December 27, 2018, the United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus, which was closed for almost eight years during the civil war. Kuwait and Bahrain hurried to announce that they would follow suit.

According to an analysis by researchers at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, the decision by the United Arab Emirates was a turning point in the framework of the broader process of Arab involvement with the Assad regime, which is motivated by the need to ensure that Iran does not emerge the great victor from the Syrian civil war. Arab concerns, especially in the Gulf, are growing with the emergence of Turkey as a new regional power, beyond its activity to suppress Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria. Turkish officials have repeatedly declared that their country is the "only logical leader" of Muslims around the world, and hinted that Turkey, not the Arab states or Iran, should be the dominant regional power in the Middle East.